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ABSTRACT

Homer's Odyssey can serve as a good source of working definitions of humanism, humanist, humanities, and their relation to humanistic education, a concept which has been adulterated by some, misplaced by others, and diluted by many. Humanism is defined as an attitude that man is independent of any devine realm and therefore responsible for himself and his society; the humanist is a model in his life-style, attitudes, and goals, in his speech, writing, reading, interests, and teaching of humanistic virtues; the humanities are the affective aspects of self-discipline, brotherly love, openmindedness, ethical behavior, dignity, grace, virtue, and excellence. Humanistic education, being the sum total of these, is the humanities taught by a humanist in a spirit of humanism. The Odyssey provides material for humanistic education's broadest subject areas: man's responsibility to himself, his family, and his society; his existence in the midst of an impersonal and 'indifferent' nature; and his attitude to the vagaries and arbitrariness of fate. The ideal common to all these areas of life is the need for self-discipline. A humanistic education should devote itself to the integration of the total person and the realization of the best of individual capabilities. A bibliography is included. (MB)

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HOMER'S ODYSSEY AND HUMANISTIC EDUCATION:

TOWARDS A THEORY OF THE HUMANITIES

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CLAY A. BOLAND, JR.

> The whole race through its artists sets down the models of its aspirations.[1]

I

The present state of humanistic education is one of chaos. Very few scholars or teachers seem to know what they are doing or why they are doing it. Non-humanistic methodologies, theories, and fads abound, their devotees waving various humanistic banners. Anti-humanistic life-styles, attitudes, and goals proliferate among humanist teachers. Attacks upon the humanities have come from humanists themselves as well as from those outside the discipline. Representative critics attack its purpose, its validity, and its vitality.

> The characteristically modern approach[es] to scholarship and training...are inherently antithetical to the aims of humanism, and when we act on them we undermine the claims of the humanities to centrality in the education of men.[2]

And there are, of course, equally pointed and difficult to gainsay criticisms from administrators, students, parents, taxpayers, and others outside the innersanctum of the

modern humanities. These criticisms are eloquently expressed by decreasing interest and increasing withdrawal of financial support.

Clearly, the essence of humanistic education has been adulterated by some, misplaced by others, and diluted by many. Fortunately, however, there are many texts that preserve this essence. Perhaps the most germane in a "research" for quintessential humanistic education is Homer's Odyssey. Despite the contributions of the last twenty-seven hundred years, this long revered Ur-humanist text is still the best source of working and much-needed prescriptive definitions for humanism, humanist, humanities, and their relation to humanistic education. And what is its essence? Its essence is that it encourages us to be, in James Dickey's phrase, "better than we are."[3]

II

The basic essence, function, or fascination of these four interrelated concepts is an article of faith: faith in the possibility that all who avail themselves of a humanistic education can be better human beings. This faith remained strong and dominant for many centuries. Humanitas meant to the Romans, who inherited the legacy of Homer and the Greeks, both the cultivation of intellect and the cultivation of moral responsibility:[4]

refinement, then, of both mind and character. This faith was retained in the Renaissance discovery of the old world and the literature of Greece and Rome and was still central in the seventeenth century. Now it is weak and dormant. Perhaps it is time to recapture and restore it to its original centrality.

The choice of Homer as our guide in this time of chaos can hardly be called arbitrary. He holds the same position in the humanist tradition (which, it should be emphasized, is not a religious tradition but rather one that treats man as man on his own without supernatural aid or belief) as Moses does in the Hebraic tradition. He is the source of the tradition's essential ideas. Jaeger, in a chapter entitled "Homer the Educator," tells us: "Homer...is something much more than a figure in the parade of literary history. He is the first and greatest creator and shaper of Greek life and the Greek character."[5] Hadas takes the claim one step further: "if it is true...that the Greeks moulded the character of Europe, then Homer may be Europe's most influential teacher, for it was Homer that moulded the Greeks."[6]

Although Homer's other great epic poem, the Iliad, and Hesiod's The Works and Days were of equal popularity and educational importance to the Odyssey,[7] I find that all that is essential and best in relation to humanistic education can be found in this ur-humanist text. Humanism,

humanists, humanities, and humanistic education are related; they all embody a common core of goals that bind these categories and labels together. It is precisely because I believe that this core exists and needs to be revisioned that I have returned to an original source to examine its essence.

Homer's Odyssey suggests the following definitions. In general, humanism can be defined as an attitude that man is independent of any divine realm and therefore responsible for himself and his society, an attitude that man, despite his bestial nature and the indifference of fate, is capable of and responsible for trying to achieve self-discipline, brotherly love, open-mindedness, ethical behavior, dignity, grace, virtue, and excellence. The humanist, then, is a model for others in his life-style, attitudes, and goals, in his speech, writing, reading, interests, and teaching of humanistic virtues. The humanities are the affective aspects of those pursuits, studies, and arts that encourage and foster the best in man: namely, self-discipline, brotherly love, open-mindedness, ethical behavior, dignity, grace, virtue, and excellence. Humanistic education, being the sum total of all of these, is the humanities taught by a humanist in a spirit of humanism.

III

Human nature is equally capable of rational and irrational behavior: Kingsley Martin has well expressed man's tendency to favor the animal within him:

> Men are more nationalistic, violent and stupid than they thought they were. We control the earth and the air, but not the tiger, the ape and the donkey.[9]

In other words, man also holds potential for lack of self-discipline, brotherly hate, closed-mindedness, unethical behavior, undignified action, disgrace, vice, and shoddiness when he surrenders to his bestial nature, his desire to avoid rationality, and his unwillingness to listen to his conscience. Erich Fromm, in The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil, theorizes that because of these ever-present contrary potentialities, each human choice represents either a regression or progression: regression to decay or barbarism through levels of necrophilia, narcissism, incestuous symbiosis, and mother fixation; or progression to growth or humanism through levels of biophilia, love for neighbor, stranger, and nature, and independence and freedom.[10]

One can see man as "nothing but the product of cultural patterns that mold him"[11] or as having freedom of choice within limited perimeters to choose noble or ignoble alternatives.[12] In either case, humanistic education can be either a positive or a negative force and, if Fromm's theory is valid, represent an aid to

regression or progression. Neutrality is impossible.

Jung's ideas offer both a support and a threat to this Homeric, Frommian, humanistic thesis. He suggests that man's dark side should not discourage us from believing in his bright side:

> Psychology has profited greatly from Freud's pioneering work; it has learned that human nature has also a black side and that not man alone possesses this side, but his works, his institutions, and his convictions as well....Our mistake would lie in supposing that what is radiant no longer exists because it has been explained from the shadow side.[13]

However, he also undercuts the role of reason in man's decision. "The great decisions of human life have as a rule far more to do with the instincts and other mysterious unconscious factors than the conscious will and well-meaning reasonableness."[14] This perhaps indicates that modern humanists should abandon their "rational heresy" that reason alone can save man[15] and try to learn more about psychological man. A sound theory of humanistic education must start not only with the source of humanism in man's writing but also in man' nature.

Psychology, indeed, may be the most potentially humanistic endeavor in modern academe. As humanists we should welcome and draw on its important contributions--especially those of Maslow and Rogers -- to the study of humans: what they are, what they can be, and the hidden forces behind their language, art, and social structures. Kirkendall sees this as the humanists' responsibility:

"It is only through a knowledge of man, his strengths and weaknesses, his capacities and potentialities, his ability to challenge the best that is within him, that we can hope for a better world."[16] The Homeric model can be pretested in light of some twentieth century theories of man' nature. Fromm's view is supportive. Jung's second statement makes us aware that the Homeric, humanist task is more heroic than we believed.

Humanistic education, then, should be an activity in which we, as teachers, <u>educate</u> (literally, lead out from); our responsibility is to <u>encourage</u> (literally, instill courage in) fellow humans to realize the best of their human potential through our attitudes, lives, and our selections of materials and methodologies. Our task is to develop potential and to instill the courage needed to realize the potential to be more fully human.

IV

Conceptually, the epic is the triumph of cosmos over chaos, of man's ability to act in a civilized manner over man's ability to act in a bestial manner, and of human purpose over nature's indifference. As always, man defines his humanity and asserts the fact that he "is human only by understanding and shaping reality, both his world and himself, according to meanings and values."[17]

The Odyssey, therefore, represents the victory of the forces of light and life (the forces of humanism) over the forces of darkness and death (the forces of barbarism). Homer's choice of images of light in connection with Odysseus and his cause upon his return to his "darkened" home emphasize this victory.[18]

Throughout the epic we are offered models of civilized cosmos in the societal order and harmony in various palaces. The courts of Alkinoos and Nestor serve as exemplars of cosmos in which men cherish and maintain just order, pleasing speech, good manners, hospitality, and true human kindness. They are in direct contrast to the suitors anarchy, vulgarity, uncouth behavior, inhospitality, and lack of humane feeling that predominate in Odysseus' palace at Ithaca. The final "house cleaning" foreshadowed in every part of the work is a necessary end to chaos.

The text clearly suggests that the results of wrong-doing are the death of man's life-sustaining and hard-earned civilization. Clarke, in discussing the courteous nature of the poem (its concern with hospitality, niceties, manners, and proprieties), indicates that such a viewpoint is not too extreme:

> [The suitors] are without courtesy, regard, tact, or restraint...[and] would [not only] utterly de-civilize Ithaca...[but also] undermine the whole facade of heroic manners....This is a society...in which manners are important because they buttress conduct and give life style,

> grace, and ease; in a formalized society they can heavily influence men's lives by providing them with traditional and approved patterns of action. All of this the barbarism of the Suitors would despoil....[In] their total impoliteness the Suitors truly represent the forces of death, since by their loutishness and their squandering they would destroy the kind of civilized life that the Odyssey celebrates.[19]

In contrast to the kingdoms of light, this kingdom of darkness is peopled with beings who have given up their birthright for a barbaric pottage of favor-seeking, sloth, licentiousness, drunkedness, unearned living and undeserved authority. In doing so, they are dead to humanity and its values.

The triumph of cosmos over chaos is centrally presented not only in man's struggle against that which in himself and within others can destroy civilization; it is also represented in man's confrontation with loneliness and helplessness in an indifferent universe -- in a world "in many of its aspects...alien and even hostile to human aspiration."[20] Although it is true that Odysseus is shown to be in contact with divine grace through the goddess Athena, most modern readers tend to interpret this as symbolic of his cleverness, intuition, and intelligence. After all, Odysseus and Athena are amazingly similar in trait and attitude. As Athena herself admits: "Two of a kind we are/ contrivers, both."[21] Post sees the gods in the Odyssey simply as "masks for luck or skill or character...[who] accomplish only what would happen anyway."[22] And Lattimore is of the opinion that "Homer's

gods are really people, and Homer is basically anti-theological."[23]

There is sufficient evidence, then, that man is on his own in the Homeric world and that divine intervention in that world is only symbolic. And even if one were to accept Athena as an actual divine being, she does not aid Odysseus in facing personal loneliness and cruel indifference. During the long journey home from Troy he is buffeted by sea and wind (symbolized by Poseidon wishing and enacting revenge) from place to place, shipwrecked, isolated (with or without his men),[24] detained, and delayed. Yet the triumph is that he does persist and overcomes all obstacles to "reach home." His persistence is what Victor Frankl would call his "will to meaning,"[25] his desire to achieve excellence and to return to his wife and home. Human purpose sustains him in the face of overwhelming odds. In so doing, he encourages us "to endure...perils and to assert the values of human life, and to maintain these values, however fragile, in the face of a hostile universe."[26]

Ironically, the reader is led, as Kazantzakis projected,[27] to see the journey with all its hardships, loneliness, and viscissitudes as more challenging, exciting, worthwhile, and ennobling than reaching and being home. The striving and the struggle are their own rewards. In psychological terms, this "becoming" is

"the unfinished structure that has...dynamic power."[28] Humanism itself has been defined as a dynamic odyssean journey and its vicissitudes: "humanism is a philosophy of change, preparing one for change, encouraging the interested acceptances of changes. It asserts for all approaches the value of the human adventure."[29]

Another quintessential element which the Odyssey presents is a model for readers to emulate--heroic, noble, courteous, and intelligent Odysseus. His character asks and inspires readers to face life heroically, nobly, courteously, and intelligently. Odysseus, in humanistic educational terms, is the teacher who conveys his subject by living it. "A civilized and humanized man is the only ostensive definition of the humanities--the evidence of the text we study, a living example of the meaning and value of what he teaches."[30] Both the teacher and Odysseus can be such a text-person; by learning experientially as well as conventionally, they augment their humanity and increase their credibility with an understanding of their fellow men.

The adventure scheme is also central to its effect; the broad scope of its material prompts the reader to pursue a larger, more demanding adventure in his own internal and external life. The wide horizons it encourages is the desire to live more fully and to be and to seek. One of the main tasks of the humanistic

educator is to enkindle and maintain this interest. As earlier humanists "opened minds and widened seas,"[31] he preserves and presents adventures of the human mind and spirit in a way that inspires emulation. It is the broadening of humane understanding that helps us to see meaning and value in self-discipline, brotherly love, open-mindedness, ethical behavior, dignity, grace, virtue, and excellence.

Since a great work employs a style and form artistically appropriate to its content, the verbal and structural medium of the Odyssey are on a level with the excellence that the work encourages and is therefore, an important part of the epic's message and appeal. They ask the reader to directly experience the nobility, sensitivity, and intelligence of which man is capable. Jaeger gives an excellent analysis of the great power which poetry in particular and art in general possess to educate us humanistically:

> Poetry can educate only when it expresses all the aesthetic and moral potentialities of mankind. But the relationship of the aesthetic and the moral element in poetry is not merely that of essential form and more or less accidental material. The educational content and the artistic form of a work of art affect each other reciprocally, and in fact spring from the same root....The aesthetic effect of style, structure, and form in every sense is conditioned and interpenetrated by its intellectual and spiritual content....Poetry cannot be really educative unless it is rooted in the depths of the human soul, unless it embodies a moral belief, a high ardour of the spirit, a broad and compelling ideal of humanity.

> It is usually through artistic expression that the highest values acquire permanent significance and the force which moves mankind. Art has a limitless power of converting the human soul -- a power which the Greeks called psychagogia. For art alone possesses the two essentials of educational influence -- universal significance and immediate appeal. By uniting these two methods of influencing the mind, it surpasses both philosophical thought and actual life.... Thus, poetry has the advantage over both the universal teachings of abstract reason and the accidental events of individual experience. It is more philosophical than life..., but it is also, because of its concentrated spiritual actuality, more lifelike than philosophy.[32]

The parallel to speech and writing in humanistic education is clearly this: the teacher, not only through his selection of texts but also through his own verbal and structural choices in spoken and written discourse, should set an inspiring example that is indicative of man's best use of language. He should also directly aid and foster the development of students' verbal and compositional skills. Most emphatically, this is not a task independent of any humanistic endeavor but is the heart of all humanism.

V

This text provides pertinent material for humanistic education's broadest subject areas: man's responsibility to himself, his family, and his society; his existence in the midst of an impersonal and therefore "indifferent" nature; and his attitude to the vagaries and abritrariness of fate. The ideal common to all of these areas of life

is the need for self-discipline. Robert Fitzgerald sees this "self-mastery" as the whole point of the Odyssey.[33] William Stanford cites this attribute and the virtue of moderation as central to the Odyssey: "In so far as Homer has any message...it comes to this: only by Ulyssean self-control and moderation can man achieve victory in life."[34] Man is responsible for using this self-discipline in all aspects of his life: to achieve dignity, virtue, and excellence for himself; in loyalty to his family; for grace, ethical behavior, and brotherly love in his society; and in persevering an ordered existence in the midst of a threatening nature and despite the capriciousness of fate. In all cases he must exercise a Promethean foresight and insight to survive the potential perverseness of self, others, nature, and fate.

For some, Odysseus is a scamp, a rogue, and a liar. Certainly, he is deceptive, cunning and clever. Although these qualities make him less perfect (and more believeable), this aspect of his behavior grows from the potential perverseness of self and is a defensive mechanism against similar perverseness in others. Certainly, the world demands of us caution and reality-orientation, and Odysseus have both in excessive amounts.

Yet it is possible to admire Odysseus's deceptions. These behaviors spring from "Promethean foresight and insight": the ability to see ahead and to analyze is

combined with a receptive mind readily adaptable to handling the unexpected and capable of interpreting it objectively. Odysseus' intellectual ability to grasp and deal with each new situation is admirable. His modus operandi, however, in handling most situations may seem to the modern reader dishonest.

Whatever one's opinion of this dignified rogue as model man, as humanistic educators our concern is to endow our students with an odyssean grasp of reality and an ability to think analytically and objectively.

VI

Yet a humanistic education that devotes itself only to student's intellectual capacities does only a partial job. The ideal in Homeric society is the integration of the total person and the realization of the best of individual capabilities. It is "a deep and intimate concern with the full flowering of human potential and personality which can only be the experience of real individuals."[35]

In the Homeric world the individual is of extreme importance. In the Odyssey we can see that his society has created "a climate in which the attainment of acknowledged excellence is a normal ambition of the individual,"[36] a climate which promotes "the insistence upon recognition of individual worth."[37] It is an individual's responsibility, therefore, to realize the best that is within him. In philosophical terms, he

must practice "eudamonism,... the ethical doctrine that each person is obliged to know and to live in the truth of his daimon, thereby progressively actualizing an excellence that is his innately and potentially."[38] In psychological terms, he must try to achieve "self-actualization," which Maslow defines as "the full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, potentialities."[39]

To do this, Odysseus must be willing to strive heroically for excellence (arête) and reputation (kleos). It would be safe to say that unless he is willing to persevere nobly in all situations the individual is automatically disqualified from an honorable place in the Homeric world. Further, since "striving heroically" is implicitly equated to "living fully," it is the essential element separating the full life from an empty and meaningless existence. In a similar manner Frankl proposes, as an antidote to the existential vacuum in inner emptiness, that "What man actually needs is not a tension-less state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him."[40]

Thus excellence in the Homeric world is to be sought in language, manners, patience, self-control, insight, and foresight, although all are to be tempered by human moderation. This is what Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson refers to as the Greek emphasis on "self-development."[41] The reputation that one gains through

action and through self-acclaim and eventually the praise of others is one's true immortality; although based on an egotistical drive, in time it becomes altruistic by supplying one's fellow men with a model of aspiration "who by doing or suffering significantly...has enriched the lives of all."[42]

Odysseus is this model of excellence. In speech, he is the story-teller and poet without peer, and as one able to even "clothe" himself with elegant verbiage when naked before the Princess Nausikaa. He is a model of manners in the court of Nausikaa's father, Alkinoos, and elsewhere. He is a model of physical excellence in sport in the games with the Phoenicians. He is a model of knowledge of the arts of war and bravery in their practice in his slaying of the suitors. He is a model of patience in bearing the long travail of his extended return to Ithaca. He is a model of self-control in almost everything he does but especially in bearing the outrageous treatment of the suitors until the opportune moment for retribution. And he is a model of insight and foresight in all his adventures, particularly in his reading of human motivation and the quick analysis of the problems presented by new situations. Odysseus thus fulfills what Kazantzakis, paraphrasing Julian Huxley, refers to as "man's most sacred duty...to promote the maximum fulfillment of the [cultural] evolutionary

process on the earth....This includes the fullest realization of his inherent possibilities."[43]

As the Homeric text implies, an important component of humanistic education is the achievement of a personal excellence based on self-discipline, dignity, and virtue. Dignity results from what Frankl labels "the consciousness of one's inner value,"[44] and virtue reflects and asserts one's ability to achieve excellence. Actually, one can see that all four terms--excellence, self-control, dignity and virtue--are interrelated and almost interchangeable; all incorporate the ideal expression of human life. Thus, humanistic educators need to recognize and foster personal excellence.

Man's society in the Odyssey is a community of mutual protection from nature and invaders and of individual excellence in human nature; it also demands self-discipline from its members. In order that society may function to encourage the best in man, each member must contribute grace and manners, ethical behavior, and brotherly love. Where this self-discipline exists, the society presented (such as that of Scherie, Pylos, or Sparta) excells. But where this self-discipline is lacking, such as in the anti-society created by the suitors at Ithaca, it leads man to realize his worst potentialities.

Humanism encourages grace, ethical behavior, and brotherly love in our societal interactions; it is

extremely important that humanists not only foster these behaviors in their students, but that as educators they practice what they profess. As all of this essay and the Odyssey implies, what one practices is what one really professes. It may be more important than what one professes.

VII

Man once more must call on self-discipline to maintain perseverance and an ordered existence in the midst of a threatening nature and an increasingly problematic future. The self-discipline of Odysseus in the face of all his many ordeals offers rich evidence of this. But there is more to his perserverance. He persists through all not only by "luck or skill of character,"[45] but also because he has a keen intellectual curiosity and a strong sustaining vision--that of returning home--that gives him the strength to go on.

The humanist intellectual curiosity is usually praised. But this sustaining vision (of man improving himself and thereby his society) has often been chided and criticized. Julian Huxley's concept of cultural evolution best summarizes this vision. We literally have a choice between trying to be better human beings or not trying and becoming something less. The view is Utopian; like all of man's philosophical religious, political, and

educational visions, it is doubtlessly only partially achievable. However, this does not make them work less since "we create the world we live in by our expectations and attitudes, our ideas and ideals."[46]

This sustaining vision is also moralistic just as the Odyssey is moralistic and this essay is moralistic: life imposes a moral task on man.[47] Homer's implicit acceptance of the teacher as a moralist who tells us how to behave is still valid--whether we wish it to be or not. He preferred to tell the Greeks how to behave in a way that reflected honor on themselves and their fellow man. We, as modern humanistic educators, can encourage students to choose the Homeric odyssey to humanism by nurturing human nature through levels of self-discipline, brotherly love, open-mindedness, ethical behavior, dignity, grace, virtue, and excellence. For those of us who love life, there is no choice. We are glad to have the challenge that humanities offers to all people "to rely on their own intelligence, courage, and effort in building their happiness and fashioning their destiny in this world."[48]

As true mentors, let us encourage ourselves and our Telemakhoi, as Homer encouraged the Greeks, to emulate the best characteristics of Odysseus: "The humane, much-enduring, serviceable, widely experienced, resourceful hero,...undaunted by the long littleness

of life, the tricks of fate, and the apathy of the stars."[49] Let us as humanists strive to preserve, convey, and live the best of those models of mankind's aspirations known as the humanities.

NOTES

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[35] Nott in Blackhorn, p. 72.

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39 See A.H. Maslow "Self-Actualizing People: A Study of Psychological Health," The Self: Explorations in Personal Growth, ed. Clark E. Moustakas (New York: Harper Colophon Books, pp. 160-194.

40 Frankl, p. 107.

41 Humanist Anthology: From Confucius to Bertrand Russell, Margaret K. Knight, ed. (London: Barrie and Rockcliff, 1961), p. 129.

42 Hadas, Humanism, p. 22.

43 Kazantzakis, p. xxii.

44 Frankl, p. 62.

45 Post, p. 169.

46 H.J. Blackham, "The Pointlessness of it All," Objections to Humanism, H.J. Blackham, ed., p. 108.

47 Blackham, p. 110. I have given my paraphrase of Blackham's interpretation of the humanism of Pomponazzi (1462-1524).

48 Corliss Lamont, quoted in Blackham, "Introduction," p. 23.

49 Stanford, p. 222.

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